

Three Assorted Romances

IT would be a thousand pities if a book by Pelham Grenville Wodehouse fell below the agreeable presage of his name. Every vocable of it has a best seller quality guaranteeing that the bearer cannot be tedious or tasteless.

Happily *A Damsel in Distress* does not "keep the word of promise to the ear, yet break it to the hope." It has no message—even under the microscope its sole mission is to amuse and entertain. It *does* amuse and entertain; though every page is rank with impossibilities, they are so veritably told that the reader accepts them without batting an eye. They are delightfully whimsical—diverting is a mild word for them, though I can fancy they will waken scorn in the breasts of such true blue Britons as think God's purpose in creating the universe was to prepare a fit setting for county families. Yet the Wodehouse darts are not tipped with gall and venom; rather they are bits of excellent fooling, shot, hit or miss, at a rather touchy and bellicose John Bull.

Witness this portrait of Percy, Lord Belphe, brother to the heroine and fat, very fat: "Already a second edition of his chin had been published, and the perfectly cut morning coat which encased his upper section bulged out in an opulent semicircle. He wore a little mustache which seemed more a complaint than a mustache. His face was red, his manner dictatorial and he was touched in the wind. Take him for all in all, he looked like a bit of bad news."

Naturally George Bevan did not like Percy. George was American, a youngish bachelor, in London looking after his latest musical comedy, which had hit the British public right where it lived. The girl who had taken his heart by storm at the second look had sought refuge in his cab from the pursuing Percy. George not only lied for her, but fought for her like a gentleman. The fighting turned out to be a great piece of luck, since through it and Percy's consequent appearance in the police court George got a clue to the name and local habitation of the charmer who had cleverly eluded him. Afterward the scene oscillates betwixt London and Hampshire—or, to be more exact, the neighborhood of Belphe Castle, the seat of Lord Marchmont, father to Bevan's enchantress, who turns out to be the Lady Maud March. Also he is a fine figure of a comic opera Earl. His obsession is rose gardening, his cross writing and living up to the family history, under the eagle eye of Lady Caroline, his widowed sister.

Every chapter has its complication—

sometimes several of them—each more laughable than the last. The talk is bright and even the necessary dullness of scene shifting and backgrounds happily brief. But it is in the climax that the author approaches originality. Lady Maud is delivered from the snare of an earlier entanglement, by finding that the lover unseen for a whole year has grown literally better fat and that he has been a trifle fickle. Afterward George has his innings and his winnings. Perhaps this should be left to the reader's discovery, but advance knowledge cannot mar a story whose charm lies as much in the telling as the tale itself.

Modern India through French eyes, even when refracted by translation, should afford high colored romance. And so it does, partially, in *Parvati*, a story by Robert Chauvelot, translated by Helen Davenport Gibson. A love story whose background is almost tiresomely Oriental, its atmosphere is wholly French.

Parvati, official but unloved wife to the Maharajah of Jeypore, unhesitatingly falls for Gilbert Desroches, the handsome French artist to whom she sits for her portrait. Yet the situation can hardly be ranked among common triangles, since the Maharajah has for consolation ready to his hand a whole zennanful of parti-colored beauties.

Local color is almost recklessly laid on. Its source does not in the least matter; the picturings are picturesque. The bathing pool blotched and splashed with the yellow, the black and the white is rendered in all the starkness of nature with the royal lord and master looking on. Durbar splendors abound wearisomely—there are tiger hunts and stranglings enough to satisfy the most bloody minded. By the help of the stranglings Parvati gets away from her palace prison and joins Gilbert. After a perilous idyllic interval, when they are about to sail to safety, she is apparently crushed under the wheels of Juggernaut's car. Was she crushed? Go ask the book.

Fiction has fashions not less than frocks and frills—when any special model has caught on inevitably it is repeated all down the line. If literature had a goat quarter you could easily people it with near Mrs. Wiggles or fill an astral institution with understudies to Mary Carey, to say nothing of her cousin in ordinary Daddy Longlegs. And there are the immemorial persistent types—for example, the impossibly humble, impossibly noble yokel in love with a high born damsel, winning at last by good hap to her favor, to the confusion of pride and blood. John Ridd, vassal extraordinary to his Lorna, was far from being the first of him, as Christopher Laird is likely to be far from being the last.

Chris, I think, grew upon his creator in spite of herself. At first, as a slow witted drunkard's child, he appears to have been cast for teaching a Great Biologic Lesson on the perils of alcohol. The Laird cabin stands somewhere between the sky and the zone of moonshine. Moonshine gets Pap Laird after getting most of his substance; snuff and "newrology" get Ma Laird—so heredity does not promise much in Chris and his two sisters.

Heredity, avant! says your determined tale teller! So Ossie, the eldest girl, takes up the white woman's burden of hard work, and carries it grandly, shielding and sparing the beautiful Leezer, so she may be soft, fair and smooth handed, fit for any fate. The fate duly arrives, in the guise of a lost huntsman, who sees, is instantly conquered and very shortly carries off Leezer, a happy bride, to his home town beyond the mountains.

Ossie, left behind for a while, works harder than ever, meanwhile striving to educate herself and Chris, without meanwhile letting the world outside know their ignorance. She succeeds partly in her own case. Chris is a hopeless proposition for ever so long, but after being transplanted to town and there falling under the spell of the wonderful Mary Baring he becomes reconciled to the three Rs, though never ceasing to pine for his "creeters," his mountains and all outdoors.

Here's but stage scaffolding. The story proper is incompressible. Well it may be—since it has pretty well everything in it in the way of happenings—storms, fire, death and taxes—all awash in a sea of dialect, yet saved from drowning by cushiony undercurrents that are supposed to be humorous—if the supposing is good.

M. McC. W.

A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS. By PELHAM GRENVILLE WODEHOUSE. George H. Doran Company.
PARVATI. By ROBERT CHAUVELOT. The Century Company.
CHRISTOPHER LAIRD. By GEORGE MCGILL. Dodd, Mead & Co.

Spain's Literature Surveyed

By REGIS MICHAUD.

IT is not yet too late, we hope, to review and praise this interesting survey of Spanish literature from the days of Cid romance to present Spanish and South American writers. To include in 300 odd pages practically the whole of Spanish letters, is in itself an achievement. To be at the same time accurate and thorough, without losing sight of the wants of the general public to whom he spoke at the Lowell Institute in Boston, has been Prof. Ford's task and he has very skilfully fulfilled it.

It was especially difficult, in the first part of the book, to bring before the general public problems jealously kept (up to then) by scholars—like, for instance, the discussion on the origin of the popular epic. That Prof. Ford on this subject is still the victim of some illusive, though alluring, theories "made in Germany," is visible. Had not a French scholar, Prof. Joseph Bedier, exploded for good in his *Epic Legends* the theory of the spontaneous formation of heroic poems like the *Song of Roland*, just as Pasteur had killed outright the myth of spontaneous fermentation?

On the Spanish drama we have a very interesting and broad minded interpretation of *Lope de Vega* in particular. Prof. Ford's literary sense has not been blurred

by Puritan ethics, though the temptation was great.

The chapter on *Cervantes*, however, is a disappointment. Approaching the greatest name of Spanish literature, one wishes that the critic had come into closer and more intimate contact with his subject. How can one review *Don Quixote* and not be tempted to decide between the hidalgo and Sancho Panza on broader lines than Prof. Ford has done (p. 98 of his book)?

The final chapters on lyric poetry and the novel are the best. The exposition is clear and pleasant. On the subject of lyric poetry it has been made still more interesting by an excellent choice of translations borrowed from Longfellow, Bryant and others to whom Prof. Ford has added, it seems, some very fine renderings of his own.

Regarding Spanish novelists of to-day one may find Prof. Ford conservative to the extreme and unduly severe upon writers like Ibañez, and Pérez Galdos in particular, who failed to meet the professor's requirements in matters pertaining to politics and religion. One need not be a Bolshevik, however, to appreciate and enjoy the beauties of *La Catedral* or of *Dona Perfecta*.

The last chapter of the volume is a somewhat hasty but very suggestive review of Spanish-American writers.

MAIN CURRENTS OF SPANISH LITERATURE. By J. M. D. FORD. Henry Holt & Co.



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